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ABSTRACT

An examination of some of the learning difficulties of Peace Corps volunteers 45 years of age and older who have attempted to learn a second language, combined with a review of research findings on the learning capacity of older learners, reveals areas in which the older learner can be helped to more complete success in foreign language study. Specific recommendations begin with the adjustment of physical classroom conditions such as lighting, temperature, seating, and acoustics. Individual needs and abilities should be defined in terms of prior education, sex, time elapsed since formal education, and previous exposure to foreign languages. Individualized instruction should be emphasized. Instruction will be relevant to older learners if material is drawn from the lives of people their age. Self-pacing should be emphasized instead of speed. The contract approach to attainable short-term goals can be useful. Concentration will be enhanced by breaking material and study periods into short units. Visual and vocal reinforcement will facilitate memorization, and new structures will be absorbed if they are integrated into those already known. Finally, the teacher may find that anxieties will be reduced if he/she is ready to take on the role of counselor and is sensitive to difficulties. (JB)

FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR OLDER LEARNERS: PROBLEMS AND APPROACHES

by

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This report is in response to the need to examine the difficulties of the elderly age group of Peace Corps Volunteers in learning or completing foreign language courses. The Volunteers involved are 45 years of age and over or have been absent from a learning situation for many years. The term older learners is generally used in literature to apply to persons over 60, but it may be assumed that the problems of those over 45 are related since the physiological aging process is beginning and especially since people of that age may anticipate some of the psychological problems of aging merely through their fear of it. The report will discuss research and findings on actual learning capabilities of older learners, their special characteristics, physiological and psychological obstacles to learning, and the circumstances under which they learn best. Finally, it will make suggestions. These suggestions do not especially advocate specific methodologies, but relate to approaches and attitudes which may help to create conditions under which older learners can learn a foreign language better. Foreign language study is the first step in immersion in a foreign culture for the Volunteers, and success is obviously crucial because of its effects on the entire subsequent encounter with that foreign culture.

1. Learning Capabilities

The learning capabilities of older learners have been studied fairly thoroughly in recent times. Welford and others have studied skill-learning capabilities and studies of intelligence (beginning with Wechsler) refer to age differences. Most difficulties arise in examining the growth or decline of intelligence with age. Wechsler's Adult Intelligence Scale for ages 16--75 indicated a decline in intelligence with age according to his system of measurement, but Matarazzo concludes that the apparent decline with age merely "reflects and catalogs the differences in the socio-cultural milieu and experiences of the different generations" (p. 116) Matarazzo reports (pp.114-115) that Birren and Morrison have found that level of education affects performance more than age and that Green found "the means showed an increase in score with age for the Verbal and Full Scales.....and little, if any, decline for the Performance Scale score between ages 25 to 64." Horn's physiological research suggested that brain tissue loss does occur with age, and brain damage may occur due to the hazzards of living, generally resulting in a decline in fluid intelligence(unformed, undirected intelligence). However, this is compensated by an increase in crystallized intelligence (specifically directed, specialized, adapted to deal with the situation at hand) until middle age and little decline thereafter, barring accidents. Thus the "compensating for the loss of one ability with the surplus of another, the older person uses crystallized intelligence in place of fluid intelligence. He substitutes accumulated wisdom for brilliance, while the younger person does the opposite." (p. 72) Welford et al. conducted experiments to test learning skills in different age groups for the Nuffield Foundation in the 1950's. Errors increase with age, but the nature of the learning materials is significant. "Fall of performance with was particularly marked in the rote learning experiment, which required the subject to build serial organizations which were completely ad hoc [i.e. meaningless].....In the

inspection experiment, in which a standard of judgement could be built up at the beginning of the experiment and thereafter "held in mind", the older subjects--at least those up to the early sixties--showed a performance which, although initially poorer, very rapidly improved to approximate equality with that of younger subjects" (1951, p. 121). These conclusions suggest that older people have no patience for apparently meaningless or irrelevant learning, while in significant learning their results, given enough time, equal those of younger learners.

Recent physiological studies of how or whether aging affects learning have yielded ambiguious results. Eisdorfer (1968) reports physiological changes and compensatory mechanisms: Troyer (in press.) postulates a model of heightened threshold for end organ activity on the effector side. Impulses are harder to initiate and may travel a bit more slowly. On the afferent side, however, there may be greater sensitivity, particularly to heightened levels of activity in the case of the relatively intact end organ....These alterations....may well point to the greater sensitivity of older persons to internal somatic changes and, indeed, perhaps to behavior in the larger social context (p. 151). In the very old, aging must be separated from the effects of various diseases. However, Cohen concludes that "the data in the literature do not support a simple hypothesis of progressive cognative decline. It remains to be carefully determined whether cognitive and behavorial impairment occur as a "natural" course of aging (a primary process) or whether it is the result of a pathological (secondary) process. Being old and being old and sick are two separate things."[1]. Stress is a factor which affects cognitive functioning. However, in the words of Eisdorfer, "stress is a physiological event with social and psychological antecedents as well as consequences." It can therefore not be stated conclusively that that aging in itself affects the ability to learn. If physical impairments exist, they are due to disease (such as failing hearing or eyesight, brain-damage or deteriotion affecting cognition and memory) and should be treated as such.

Practicing teachers, experienced with teaching older learners, tell us on the basis of their own observations that when due provision is made for the physical comfort of older people, they will learn as much, if not as quickly, as younger students. Hand (p. 123) affirms that "adults, regardless of aging, can still learn." Thus any deterioration in the faculties used by younger learners can be compensated by more skillful use of faculties developed with age, such as wisdom and social sensitivity.

2. Special Tendencies

The ability of older people to learn may be affected by other factors besides health, such as prior education, sex, time of day, and above all their psychological attitudes towards the material to be learned, the learning

1. Letter from Donna Cohen to Judith Roumani, Feb 14, 1978: quoted with kind permission of Dr. Cohen.

situation and in the case of languages, the foreign culture. These latter aspects will be discussed later in this paper. Hand has shown that the combined effect of various kinds of intelligence rises sharply to a peak in middle age, and declines insignificantly thereafter. He states that "the greatest intellectual productivity tends to occur in the 30s and early 40s" (p. 73.), an age only just prior to that with which this paper is concerned. Older people with high verbal ability (vocabulary) do better in learning tests than those with low ability, suggesting that previous education in youth affects the ability to learn in maturity and old age. A small amount of research has referred to differences between older men and women in learning. Cohen (in press) suggests that elderly men may be superior on tests involving spatial abilities, while women tend to do better in tests [illegible]rbal abilities, particularly under fast paced conditions. This suggests [illegible] the general conclusion that older people need a slower pace in order [illegible]earn may not necessarily apply to older women. Cohen (1977) also suggests that women, in contrast to men, actually become more outgoing and active as they get older. These qualities would obviously aid language learning. The reason for these differences--health, motivation, arousal, etc,--are not at all clear. On the other hand, Meichenbaum reports that elderly women perform worse than men in problem solving tasks, suggesting attitude as the cause: "another contributing factor to the poor problem-solving performance of the elderly, especially elderly women, is their less favorable and often deprecatory attitude about their problem-solving ability, and the general negative set which they bring to the task." (p. 274) Obviously social and biological differences are not as pronounced as individual personalities. Everyone knows of sprightly ninety-year-olds just undertaking the study of Spanish, and other individuals who seem to retire from life at the age of forty. Generalizations are never more than that.

3. Obstacles to Learning

This rapid survey of research findings on learning in the elderly brings us to an analysis into two groups of what appear to be the obstacles to learning. The first group consists of physiological obstacles and the second of psychological obstacles, but it will be obvious to the reader that they may intertwine and be ultimately inseparable. The second group will be of more interest to teachers as it consists entirely of the obstacles which can be alleviated through the skills and commitment of teachers.

a. Physiological obstacles

The physiological obstacles affecting foreign language learning in particular would be difficulties in hearing or vision and disease producing stress which interferes with learning. Difficulty in learning at a fast pace would be a very significant factor for an older student in a class using audio-lingual methods where the aim is quick responses. On the other hand, deficiencies in problem-solving skills would interfere in a class in which the structures of the language must be deduced. The audio-lingual method, which became popular in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, was designed largely for young students, when experiments were being made in introducing foreign

languages to younger and younger ages. The method depends on habit forming in spoken linguistic patterns, a more sophisticated form of rote-learning. Young people are much better at this form of learning than older people, as we have seen. With older people, haphazard learning is generally rejected and there is a heightened need to integrate new learning into existing structures held in the brain. Exposure to large amounts of foreign language material, the structure of which is difficult to perceive, will not produce successful learning in older people. Moreover, the interference of previously learned material (i.e. the native language) may prove an obstacle unless older people can be persuaded that they are dealing with a new system altogether.

b. Psychological Obstacles

This last point leads us to the psychological obstacles to learning a foreign language. Among the elderly, the desire for success is often outweighed by fear of failure. One may assume that the balance gradually shifts from the former to the latter during the middle years. Undertaking to learn a foreign language is a particularly dramatic way to expose oneself to the risk of failure. Naturally, the old are less prone than the young to adopt new, extraneous and difficult goals in their lives, rightly feeling that they have less time. Statistics on the reasons for taking courses show that, after the age of 40, people study in order to expand their knowledge, rather than to acquire job skills. They thus wish to integrate new learning into their existing body of knowledge, rather than learn skills which they believe will be indirectly useful. If acquiring a foreign language cannot be fitted into an individual's scope of desired knowledge, he or she will not learn it successfully.

The anxiety which accompanies the fear of failure when undertaking any learning task for an older person is especially heightened in the case of learning a new language. The elderly experience a need for life review, wishing to see their lives as a process on integration. (Myerhall & Tufte) Older students may feel that learning a new language implies the opposite of an integrating process. Being in a classroom with much younger people and having to compete with them, or even being obliged to learn from a younger teacher, can create anxiety since the older student will feel that much of his personal dignity and worth are at stake. Learning a new language has been compared to acquiring a new personality in another language. Curran describes the stages of the birth of the new self. Obviously much anxiety and insecurity will accompany the process and relations between older students and a younger teacher may be strained.

4. Circumstances in which Older Learners Can Best Learn

Some efforts can be made to overcome these obstacles to foreign language learning in older students. The physical conditions (temperature, lighting, acoustics) should be the best possible. Hand has made useful practical suggestions in this respect. Recommendations on teaching foreign languages to the elderly are scattered, but some of the more penetrating studies of the process of learning a language provide suggestions which, combined with each teacher's own experience, may help to improve the conditions under which older students try to learn.

As we have seen, meaningless rote-learning is particularly difficult for older people. Distant, undefined goals are difficult to work towards, especially for older people. Therefore methods of learning which clearly establish attainable short-term goals for the older learner will be of great help. A "contract" in which these goals are stated from the beginning would clearly help, and would also alleviate some of the insecurity of the new learning situation. Methods of memorizing which draw on the fundamental motivation to learn rather than imposing anxiety-arousing mental or oral exercises have a greater chance of success with older people. Stevick's Memory, Meaning and Method, provides valuable suggestions in this respect. The author refers to memorization tests which point out the difference between short-term and long-term memory: "There is evidence that a certain amount of subjective organizing goes on in any memorization task....If for some reason the mind is unable to function in these ways while new material is available for processing during short-term memory, future ability to retrieve the material or to recognize it is seriously affected.

Stevick also cites studies showing that "The student's memory benefits from actively searching out, discovering and depicting, as contrasted with rote repetition, sentence reading, or even generation of their own relatively unmaginative sentences." (p. 26) The effects of vocalization on memory "may not involve just the disruption of rehearsal strategies, but may instead lessen the selective attention capabilities that are necessary for effective encoding in memory." (p. 31) The need to introduce new learning material into previously existing structures, in order to prevent the interference of these structures, is paramount in older learners. Stevick's findings and deductions, if applied to older learners of foreign languages, suggest that a primarily audio-lingual method is not likely to be successful. Rather than vocalization, older students need time and some silence to organize and insert new material into long-term memory. Stevick also shows that spacing and pacing are important for memory (p. 28-29). As has been shown, self pacing is considered important for older learners in general. Thus the emphasis of the audio-lingual method on speed would have to be abandoned. It would also be advisable, as Hand suggests, to break the material into shorter lowers of concentration of older people (a result perhaps of anxiety). Language approaches which emphasize individualized but not isolated learning (e.g. Pillet) have potential for the special needs of older learners.

From a psychological point of view, Stevick shows that "what is essential for memory is response by the learner". (p. 38) Independently of other modifications in technique, conventional language learning materials could be adapted for the interests of older people, rather than for those of teenagers and young people. Response and commitment increase when the class is a community whose members are trying to communicate with each other, not a group of individuals each trying to impress the teacher with his knowledge. Stevick discusses Curran's counseling learning and other methods aimed at using foreign language for communication between members of a community.

In counseling-learning, or community learning, the teacher is known as the "counselor" and the student as the"client". The client solicits help on whatever linguistic elements he needs in order to communicate with other clients. There is no criticism but much encouragement and generation of positive feeling in order to facilitate the delicate process of the growth of the foreign languate "self". The foreignness, shallowness, and impression of irrelevance which the foreign language has for the student should then disappear. Learning a foreign language may turn out to be an integrating experience after all, since it may help to bridge gulfs within the Divided Self between the Performing Self and the Critical Self which inhibits it.[2] For Volunteers, learning the foreign language is part of the experience of being a Volunteer which the student already hopes will be an integrating one. The integration should take part on two levels: within the student's personality and of the individual learner into the foreign language community. With the help of a sensitive teacher, once the learner senses that these goals are possible, a great incentive is added to language learning. The two types of of purposes in language learning, "instrumental" and "integrative" (Jakobovits), could come together effectively in the case of the Peace Corps Volunteer.

Stevick discusses further "humanistic" methods in a work still in manuscript. Practical advice to teachers warns them of some of the problems they may encounter in applying these approaches. For example, students may sense that encouragement is deliberate and therefore feel additional insecurity if they want to be criticized and corrected. This would appear to apply especially to older students whose idea of what a classroom should be is quite authoritarian. The teacher should not abandon the teacher mask and adopt the ordinary person mask for too long or great insecurity will result. Stevick writes that the teacher's role is to create a space into which the student is free to grow; control and responsibility should therfore always be in the teacher's hands.

Another technique which, in my view, might usefully be applied to the teaching of older persons is Suggestopedia, or the Lozanov method. The latter has shown excellent results in penetrating superficial layers of the mind and reaching long-term memory through the use of music and relaxation. It should be considered seriously for teaching the older learners since anxiety is a great contributor to failure to learn.

5. Conclusion

No technique in itself is bound to succeed. The least promising method may succeed with older learners if the teacher is understanding of their special needs regarding physical setting, pacing and the opportunity to structure memory, as well as of their anxieties and insecurities. The most important thing seems to be that these needs should be recognized, and that older stu-

2. I am grateful to Dr. Stevick for these ideas suggested in a conversation (March 22, 1978) and for allowing me to read two chapters of a book in manuscript.

dents should not be exposed to learning situations designed for young people with differing primary learning capabilities. When this happens, it seems that the psychological effect on older students can permanently impair their capacity to learn the language. Teachers must be aware that learning can only take place effectively if the learner is emotionally disposed to integrate the new material into his personality. Therefore sensitivity to attitudes and the ability to generate motivation are more important than techniques and syllabi. Obviously, mastery of the language and ability to teach it must exist in order for the teacher to inspire the student's confidence in him. New approaches such as community learning and suggestopedia may be worth trying with older learners because they are individualized for the student's needs and pace. With the application of the above suggestions and those of the attached material, older students should be proven to be fully capable of learning a foreign language.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Physical conditions (lighting, temperature, seating, acoustics) should be the best possible for older learners.

2. Define individual needs and abilities in terms of prior education, sex, how long since the student has had structured education, previous exposure to foreign languages.

3. Individualize teaching as far as possible. Some older learners may succeed with younger students; others may need a separate class.

4. Make material relevant to older learners, i.e. eliminate material dealing with life of young students, and substitute material drawn from their own lives.

5. Diminish emphasis on speed. Provide opportunity for self-pacing.

6. Define attainable short-term goals in terms of a "contract".

7. Break material and study periods into short units for better concentration.

8. To facilitate memorization, present materials both vocally and visually. Allow time for absorption into long-term memory.

9. Integrate new material into previously existing structures of knowledge.

10. Without lessening responsibility for material, reduce anxieties and insecurity through consciousness of role as counselor.

11. Be sensitive and alert to potential difficulties.

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